



Zach Tate's Texas Music Profiles

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Roark Smith

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The sad irony of classic rock songs of the 60's and 70's, like Steppenwolf's "Born To Be Wild" is while the music itself was created from anti-establishment, freak-flag waving rebellion and celebration, many of those great songs have come to represent nothing more than statistical data in the corporate radio scheme to make more cash. The message, the art, and the cultural value of songs, old and new, are a distant second to generating a profit. Along with bottom-line driven playlists have come policies that forbid DJs from playing, and saying, what they want, leaving a big hole in the fabric of radio culture that once defined generations and opened channels for cultural change and enrichment.

Enter Houston/Galveston DJ, Roark Austin Smith (known simply as "Roark" on KPFT 90.1 in Houston, 89.5 in Galveston), one of the few disc jockeys on broadcast radio who still care enough about the message, the art, and the cultural value of the music to take a stand against spinning songs strictly for the purpose of making money.

Roark, Texas Music Awards "DJ of the Year" 2011 and 2012 (just after the Islander went to print, the Texas Music Awards announced Roark DJ of The Year for 2013) grew up in Houston listening to Rice University's KTRU favoring punk rock. One day while in high school Roark heard a fast driving song by what he thought was an unknown punk band. After peddling his bike to the Rice radio station to ask the DJ what he had played, Roark unknowingly discovered a new world of music. The song was Deep Purple's "Highway Star" and so began Roark's passion for classic rock.

Working as a waiter after graduating high school and unsure of his future, Roark was frequently told his deep voice was perfect for radio. A chance meeting with a DJ from regional station KACC (Alvin Community College's 89.7 FM station) helped guide Roark to the school where he soon began reading the news on-air, and eventually taking classes.

After graduating, magna cum laude, from ACC in 1995, and spending time DJ'ing on KACC (well known for playing a lot of local music), hosting a classic rock show called, "Uncastrated Classic Rock", Roark was hired by then Houston classic rock station, KKRW 93.7 FM, known more commonly as "The Arrow". Although Roark became a popular on-air personality working the midnight to 5 a.m. shift he was forbidden from making choices of his own when it came to song selection; he was handed a list and told what to play. "After a year working at The Arrow I went to the program director and asked him if I could play 3 songs an hour, on a Sunday night between 10pm and midnight, from band's they already played like Steve Miller, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Led Zeppelin. Songs they weren't playing but were really good ones from those artists. He said, 'no we pick the tunes around here. You sell the station, talk about the web page and the morning



Texas Music Awards DJ of The Year, Roark Smith, (KPFT 90.1 FM in Houston, 89.5 in Galveston) plays the locals - and whatever else he wants!



show...’ I told him I have to call it quits.”

Not long after Roark said goodbye to corporate American radio he was hired by KPFT and immediately given his classic rock fix hosting “Vintage Vinyl”, a brief 3-song segment during his mid-day shift. Roark played a variety of music styles from the state of Texas, ever increasing his knowledge and passion for the Texas sound. Changes at KPFT, however, in the coming year would see Roark out of a job once again and reluctantly heading back to The Arrow. Though Roark loved radio and wanted to participate at some level his patience was once again tested. Despite hosting a show that featured live recordings of classic rock artists called, “Saturday Night Live”, he was still forbidden to choose the songs he wanted to play and again quit the station, this time for good.

With nowhere to go to spread his classic rock DJ wings, Roark hung up his microphone and left the broadcasting industry altogether for 5 years. Fortunately, more changes at KPFT opened up an opportunity and, with his reputation for not compromising his integrity, Roark was hired back and given complete freedom to play the music of his choice.

Roark’s enthusiasm for the power of music is contagious and comes through on his program, “Wide Open Spaces” (10am – 1pm, Monday – Friday) and in his song selections. He frequently features live in-studio performances by artists from Houston and Galveston (Galveston’s Hamilton Loomis, Sam Navarro and Kevin Anthony have all been on Roark’s show) as well as many passing through town. His show includes classic rock songs (but not the stuff heard on the corporate owned stations) along with blues, Americana, country, alternative rock and music by many local and regional musicians. “I get calls all the time where people say they were in a real bad place and the music I played uplifted them and they forgot about all their worries. That’s the biggest compliment I can get. What an opportunity to make people feel great! By playing the same songs over and over again, corporate radio is just not taking that opportunity to hit people in the heart. There are so many great tunes of that era that are just forgotten. I think radio and music has power and for it not to be utilized is sad. Houston is too cool of a town not to have cool radio!”

Roark is a rarity in the world of broadcast radio these days. A throwback to rock’s glory years when DJ’s ruled the airwaves with their personalities and choices of music. A documentary scheduled for release this spring by Toronto filmmaker, Roger King, titled, “I Am What I Play” follows the careers of 4 such pioneering 1970’s DJ’s from New York, Boston, Seattle and Toronto and drums home just how important radio was and still is. As King explains, “The most compelling radio is when stations let those personalities do what they want, within the framework of the station format. The other strength of radio besides the personalities is the fact that it can be so local. The station can and should be part of the community it serves and that would most certainly mean giving a platform for discovering local music.”

The issue of profit-driven, corporate control of rock & roll has been taken on by many artists over the years, perhaps most notably by Tom Petty in his song, “The Last DJ” (once banned by Clear Channel, owner of many radio stations across the U.S., for being “anti-radio”). Petty writes:

*Well you can't turn him into a company man
You can't turn him into a whore
And the boys upstairs just don't understand anymore
Well the top brass don't like him talking so much
And he won't play what they say to play
And he don't want to change what don't need to change
There goes the last DJ*



"I Am What I Play" is a feature length documentary about



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*Who plays what he wants to play
And says what he wants to say, hey hey hey...*

*And there goes your freedom of choice
There goes the last human voice
There goes the last DJ*

Listen to Roark's "Wide Open Spaces" on KPFT 90.1 FM in Houston and 89.5 in Galveston, M-F 10am-1pm. On-line at KPFT.org